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Nation and family in the work of Catherine Lim

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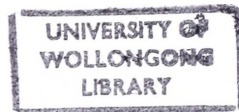
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**NATION AND FAMILY IN THE WORK OF
CATHERINE LIM**



**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree**

**MASTER OF ARTS (HONOURS)
IN POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES**

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

BERYL J. BATTEN, BACHELOR OF ARTS

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

The work of Singaporean writer Catherine Lim reflects the cultural and political change that has taken place in Singapore since its inception as a British trading-post in 1819, until its emergence in 1965 as an independent nation controlled by the dominant Chinese sector of the population.

Lim's stories of traditional Chinese/Singaporean life in the colonial period, are juxtaposed with stories of modern westernized Singaporean life, and this dichotomy parallels the narrative of Singapore itself.

The Singapore government's attempts to construct a Singaporean 'national identity' based upon Chinese Confucian 'values' of home and family are interrogated by Lim when her characters are faced with the conflicting demands of traditionalism and modernity. These competing 'values' create areas of conflict that are integral to the cultural negotiation taking place in both text and nation.

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INTRODUCTION

For Australians growing up in the 1930s and 40s, Singapore represented a British presence in the area that was both familiar and familial. The rubber plantations of the Malay hinterland provided an 'exotic' background for the port city of Singapore sitting at the tip of the peninsula, but their importance in Britain's colonial enterprise in Malaya was subsumed in the larger picture of Britain's 'civilizing' role in the area. The 'idea' that we developed about Singapore was that of a modern western city---Raffles Hotel was a well-known and sophisticated social venue patronized by wealthy Europeans. This simplistic view of Singapore was informed by a school curriculum that privileged Singapore's, and Australia's 'British' heritage.

The Australian school system, modelled on the British system promulgated the 'values' of Empire---'God Save the King' was sung at morning assembly, Empire Day was celebrated with flags and badges, and more importantly, a half-day holiday. Singapore and Australia were two red patches on our school Atlas in close proximity to each other which evidenced our common links with that Empire. That common interest was strengthened when in 1938 the British High Command developed Singapore as a naval base and a tangible sign of British power in the area. The description of Singapore as the Lion City meant to us the 'British' lion, not the 'Asian' lion.

The second world-war and the fall of Singapore in 1942 to Japanese forces in a land assault shattered illusions of British invincibility, but served to reinforce the view of Singapore as part of our Empire 'family'. In the ensuing months newspaper reports and radio broadcasts highlighted the plight of British nationals and Australians who were taken prisoner by the Japanese, or who managed to escape. The fate of Singaporeans who were not Europeans was of marginal

interest in the jingoistic fervour of the time. Their stories were peripheral to the 'greater' tragedy taking place, that of the defeat of British forces by Asian forces. That defeat was the beginning of the end of Singapore's British colonial narrative. Singapore's post-war leader Lee Kuan Yew stated in later years that,

When the war came to an end in 1945, there was never a chance of the old type of British colonial system ever being recreated. The scales had fallen from our eyes and we saw for ourselves that the local people could run the country.¹

Singaporeans who lived through the Japanese Occupation and then fought for their independence in the post-war years have developed a different narrative to the one envisaged by Singapore's founder Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and the one contained in the narrative of 'Empire'. The new narrative is being worked out within a different cultural, political and social context but it is still based upon the same patriarchal capitalist philosophies.

During my studies of post-colonial literatures at Wollongong University in the 1990s I was introduced to the work of Singaporean writer Catherine Lim which drew attention to the histories that had been submerged in the British accounts of colonial Malaya. Of interest also was the way that British 'values' had been impressed on both Australian and Singaporean citizens through the education system. Both systems valorized British standards and values over those of the local scene. In Singapore's case, this has emerged as a clash between 'western values' and 'Chinese values', and this clash creates much of the conflict in Lim's texts. It surfaces in many stories as clashes between traditionalism and modernity---traditionalism to ensure a legitimate past for the new nation of Singapore, and modernity to ensure a legitimate place in the modern world.

¹ Lee, Kuan Yew, The Battle for Merger, 1961, p.11, quoted in Minchin, James, No Man is an Island, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p.36.

The period of the Japanese Occupation does not appear to any great extent in Lim's work; 'A Soldier Stalks'² is one of the few references to the Occupation. Her stories are instead fictional accounts of the Chinese traditional familial culture of the colonial period and the incorporation of, and contestation with, those 'values' in the development of modern Singapore. The role of the family and the position of women in that institution interact in her stories with a patriarchal capitalist social structure within which opposing 'values' are in a continuing state of negotiation.

The texts examined here exhibit the preoccupations of origins, human relationships and cultural imperatives that are common to post-colonial narratives. The Singaporean narrative has the added complexity of its history as an immigrant community brought into being because of Britain's colonial agenda. Catherine Lim is well placed to give literary form to at least part of that complexity. Chinese traditional practices were part of her early life, and her elite background provided the opportunity and language to support her creative output. She engages with dominant practices in her society in a variety of imaginative ways through personal narrative, romance, parody and fantasy. Her stories interrogate subject positioning and manifestations of power that impact upon Singaporeans' lives.

Since the end of the Second World War, the Malay Peninsula has become the independent political entity of Malaysia, an entity that has constructed its own agenda for the development of the area and the political advancement of the Malay peoples. The peninsula's diverse racial formation has led to further change. Singapore, with its predominantly Chinese population, emerged in 1965

² Lim, Catherine, 'A Soldier Stalks', in *They Do Return...but gently lead them back*, Times Editions Pty. Ltd., Singapore, 1992, p.102, all subsequent references to Lim's literary work will include page references in the text.

as an independent nation in the region with its own particular program of forging a national culture and identity. In this dissertation I will explore the ways in which these historical processes surface in, and impact upon, Lim's writing.

Catherine Lim was born March 23rd 1942, in Kulim on the Malay Peninsula where her father worked as a rubber estate manager, and she lived there until she was twenty-eight. Peter Wicks' scholarship on her life and work places those 'Malaysian years' as the period that 'essentially formed Catherine Lim both as a person and as a writer'.³ Her work reflects the cultural heritage of her Hokkien family background during those Malaysian years and 'the myriad Chinese legends told by an endless stream of elderly relatives and neighbours'.⁴ As part of a 'large extended family, she listened to her mother's creative story-telling in basic Chinese dialect' and learned the procedures required for appeasement of, and supplication to local deities. Her town's close proximity to rubber plantations allowed her to absorb knowledge of the wider community around her, and those 'recollections of childhood and her observations on the townsfolk...continue to echo down the years'.⁵

But also evidenced in Lim's work are the personal effects of her Catholic convent-school formal education. In stories of modern Singaporean life her women characters are not at ease with marriage break-ups and divorce. 'Third Grandaunt's Story'⁶ and 'The Bell Jar'⁷ are examples of Lim's personal conflict in this area. The sound western-style education that she received at the 'prestigious

³ Wicks, Peter C., 'Catherine Lim: The Malaysian Years (1942-1970)', in New Literatures Review, No.25, Summer South, 1993, p.39.

⁴ Lim, Catherine, 'The Writer as a Cultural Anomaly', in Perceiving Other Worlds, Edwin Thumboo (ed), Times Academic Press, Singapore, 1991, p.370.

⁵ Chew, D., Singapore Business Times, 23rd September, 1989, quoted in Wicks, Peter C., op cit., p.40.

⁶ Lim, Catherine, 'Third Grandaunt's Story' in The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream: Love Stories of Singapore, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1987, p.114.

⁷ Lim, Catherine, 'The Bell Jar', in Deadline for Love and Other Stories, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1992, p.133.

Penang Free School',⁸ her studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur where she graduated in 1964 with Honours in English Literature and her Diploma in Education which followed have all contributed to her ability to represent the complex society around her. Her cultural background has provided her with a wealth of subject matter to draw upon and her western education has provided a means of access to the wider English literary market place beyond the confines of Singapore.

Lim's works include Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore, (1978), Or Else the Lightning God, (1980), The Serpent's Tooth, a novella, (1982), They Do Return, (1983), The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream---Love Stories of Singapore, (1987), O Singapore!, (1989), Deadline for Love and other stories, (1992), Love's Lonely Impulses, a volume of poetry, (1992), The Woman's Book of Superlatives, (1993), Meet Me on the Queen Elizabeth 2!, a traveller's tale, The Best of Catherine Lim, (1993), The Bondmaid, a novel, (1995). She has published essays, conference papers and articles produced during her time as a newspaper journalist. She holds a PhD in applied linguistics, and has had a full-time career as an English language teacher. Her books are used as academic texts in Singapore and abroad, and have been translated into French, German, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese and Tagalog. She now lives in Singapore and has been writing full-time since 1992.

Woven into Lim's familial vignettes and personal narratives are discourses of power and knowledge, which despite a level of social criticism, support the ideology driving the construction of the new nation of Singapore. The complex relationship between Singapore and the West has created a mix of Western and Confucian 'values' within which Singaporean identity is being developed.

⁸ Wicks, op cit., p.43.

Singapore's construction in 1819 as a British colonial trading post with largely Chinese immigrant labour, has meant that western notions of 'democracy' and 'progress' interact with 'an ancestral immigrant canopy, replete with cultural traits like ancestor worship, filial piety, reverence for property, marital fidelity, and educational competitiveness'.⁹ This interaction, coupled with impetus for change in the area, has opened up a space for contestation with the dominating practices of patriarchal capitalism, upon which the British presence in the region, and the political imperatives of the Chinese national government are based. Literature in all its forms is one such space of contestation that is used by politician and intellectual alike, and Lim uses her space to engage with the social effects of those authoritarian practices.

During the years of social restructuring that followed Singapore's Independence, the 'Machiavellian' politics of the People's Action Party have been subsumed within the concept of 'pragmatism'. It has distanced itself from its early association with the Communist Party, but has retained that Party's cardinal principle that 'the end justifies the means'.¹⁰ Using this rationale, the P.A.P. has 'intervened massively in all spheres of social life'.¹¹ P.A.P. control of labour unions, the press, and universities was based upon the perceived needs of 'national survival', and in the face of economic success those restrictive practices were legitimized and received popular support. But increasing prosperity brought with it an impetus for the realization of ideals of 'democracy' that are contained within the capitalist discourse upon which Singapore's development has been based. With the change of leadership from Lee Kuan Yew to Goh Chok Tong in 1990, a more 'open' form of government has been envisaged by Singaporeans.

⁹ Wicks Peter C., 'Literary Perspectives on Singaporean Community', a paper prepared for the Internationalizing Communities Conference, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, 27-30 November, 1996, p.7.

¹⁰ George, T.J.S., Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, Andre Deutsch, London, 1975, p.38.

¹¹ Chua, Beng-Huat, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore, Routledge, London, 1995, p.156.

However, 'after several years of apparent relaxation.....the government reacted harshly to criticisms attacking Singapore's institutions or its fundamental beliefs'.¹² One critic who was 'surprised' by the government's turn-around was Catherine Lim. In two articles, and an interview in the Straits Times in 1994 she criticized the morality of new salary schemes for ministers and senior servants, and went further to argue in her 'Great Affective Divide' article that the government of Goh Chok Tong had returned to the top-down style of government of the Lee Kuan Yew years and had lost touch with the people. Her implication that Lee remained a powerful elder statesman who was greatly influencing government programs, prompted a reply from the Prime Minister that,

in the Asian context, it was important that the authority of the Prime Minister be upheld, not undermined by, in this case, fringe writers. And that, if left unchecked, snide comments would, over time, erode people's respect for the office.¹³

Terms such as 'fringe writers' and 'snide comments' reflect the government's attempt to discredit Lim on a professional and personal level rather than through reasoned debate. The Prime Minister further commented that Dr. Lim should join a political party if she wished to criticize the government. That statement suggests that criticism should not come from the general population and bears out the kind of 'divide' that Lim was highlighting in her articles. Diane Mauzy argues that there was some sympathy for Lim's views, but conservative Chinese elements of Singapore society were 'not comfortable with some of the government's more liberal policies'. For whatever reason, Lim found it judicious to write a 'private letter to Goh expressing regret for the distress that she had caused him'.¹⁴

¹² Mauzy, Diane, K., 'Singapore in 1994: Plus Ça Change...', in Asian Survey, Vol.XXXV, No.2, February 1995, p.179.

¹³ Kwang, Han Fook, 'Prime Minister's remarks show that on fundamental issues, nothing has changed', The Straits Times Weekly Edition, December 1994, p.15.

¹⁴ Mauzy, op. cit. p.182.

Lim's questioning of 'authority' appeared at a time when conservative groups, and P.A.P. leadership, were concerned about an 'excessive individualism'¹⁵ that had emerged which was resistant to the authority of the government that had brought success to Singapore. The P.A.P.'s reaction to 'individualism' has been to emphasize the necessity of a 'return' to 'cultural roots',¹⁶ as an answer to the westernization of Singaporeans. In this cultural shift Confucianism was seen to contain the 'values' necessary for the stabilizing of a multi-ethnic immigrant based Singaporean society. As a discourse aimed at countering fragmenting modernity, Confucianism reflects a Chinese cultural heritage in which,

virtues are loyalty and obedience to authority, and of course, the reciprocity of responsibility of the authority to the subject. So defined, the leadership can take two possible forms: authoritarian or paternalistic. In either case, decisions are made for the subject by the leaders. Given the presumed reciprocity, it is assumed that such decisions, whatever their consequences, have the best interests of the subjects in mind.¹⁷

In its efforts to promote the Confucianisation of Singapore, the P.A.P. recruited Confucian scholars from abroad to construct moral education courses which emphasized 'an essentially sinic cultural heritage'¹⁸ within which a compliant Singaporean 'national identity' could develop freed from the 'corruption' of western notions of individualism.

The P.A.P. has used the Confucian thesis as a knowledge/power construct in the service of the state to reify the 'Chineseness' of Singaporean society. Its nomination of Mandarin as a mother tongue to undermine the dominance of English exemplifies the authoritarian and exclusionary nature of its edicts. Its

¹⁵ Chua, op. cit., p.158.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Chua, op.cit., pp.160-161.

¹⁸ Op.cit., p.159.

family planning and population control programs culminated in the 'Great Marriage Debate', a social program that Lim satirizes in the story 'In Search Of (A Play)',¹⁹ The debate was structured around issues of class, race, and gender, during which Lee Kuan Yew,

spoke feelingly of the past, when families could enforce the marriage of their daughters...He expressed regret at his government's socialist policies in the heady days of early postcolonial independence, when women's suffrage and universal education relinquished to women some control over their biological destinies. He speculated thoughtfully on the possibility of reintroducing polygamy (by which he meant 'polygyny' rather than 'polyandry'), outlawed in Singapore since the Women's Charter of 1961, and voiced frank, generous admiration of virile Chinese patriarchs of the past, whose retinue of wives, mistresses, and illegitimate children unquestionably testified, under the principles of social Darwinism, to their own, and thus their children's genetic superiority.²⁰

Lim's stories identify much of the racist, classist and sexist content of this 'Confucian thesis', and throughout her writing she interrogates appropriation of that cultural discourse as a political tool, in particular the positioning of women and the family in that discourse. Tensions arise when Confucian 'values' clash with the social needs of the weak and powerless members of the society, and this dichotomy is a site of conflict in many of her stories.

Lim writes from the perspective of the English-educated middle-class Chinese Singaporean, but her stories embrace a wide spectrum of race, class and gender subjectivities which must be negotiated when traditional customs and ideologies are re-aligned to serve the interests of an emerging modern mercantile

¹⁹ Lim, Catherine, 'In Search Of (A Play)', in *O Singapore!*, Times Books International, Singapore, 1989, p.59.

²⁰ Heng, Geraldine, & Devan, Janadas, 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore', in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, Parker, A., Russo, M., Sommer, D., Yaeger, P., (eds), Routledge, London, 1992, p.349.

system. In stories of colonial Singapore, such as 'The Rest is Bonus',²¹ and 'The Bondmaid',²² characters are positioned within the hierarchical power structures of colonial capitalist development and traditional Asian power structures. Here, the brutal husband's only relief from the oppression of the colonial labour system is through violence against his wife and drunkenness, the battered wife has only the 'blessing' of the local Goddess to aid her, and the Bondmaid is 'active' only as a ghost who returns from the grave to haunt her abuser.

The rigidity of this subject positioning is opened up in stories of post-colonial Singapore. In 'The Awakening'²³ and 'Puay Ah Moi',²⁴ the working class is a paid labour force that has the ability to disrupt the social structure of 'customary' behaviour without fear of violent reprisal. The limits set by government regulations provide at least some measure of protection from abuse and exploitation. 'Bondmaids' can no longer be treated as either 'slaves' or 'sex objects'. Customary behaviour patterns and personal relationships are in a state of flux in these stories. They reflect the realities of modern Singaporean life where the legal system is available as an area of redress for social injustice. Recent media coverage of abuse suffered by a 'bondmaid' revealed that,

A 61 year-old grandmother who slapped her Indonesian maid and splashed hot water on her, was jailed for five months and fined \$1,000.²⁵

An accompanying article suggested that employers need 'counselling' to overcome their 'outdated notions of a servant', and that counselling should be

²¹ Lim, Catherine, 'The Rest is Bonus', in The Woman's Book of Superlatives, Times Books International, Singapore, 1993, p.62.

²² Lim, Catherine, 'The Bondmaid', in Or Else the Lightning God, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., Singapore, 1984, p.46.

²³ Lim, Catherine, 'The Awakening', in Deadline for Love and Other Stories, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1992, p.41.

²⁴ Or Else the Lightning God, p.150.

²⁵ The Straits Times Weekly Edition, Saturday January 25th, 1997, p.1.

'conducted in dialect, if necessary for the benefit of older folk'.²⁶ This case exemplifies the fact that during periods of accelerated social change, tensions surface which require either personal compromise, or state coercion, for their resolution and it is in this form of conflict that many of Lim's characters are entangled.

Thus, embedded in Lim's family histories and dissections of human relationships is the narrative of Singapore itself. Just as the nation has had to develop a new awareness of itself, and new patterns of growth, so Lim's characters must come to terms with new ideas and new ways of living. The task of doing this whilst keeping a sense of continuity with the customs and beliefs of a past generation results in tensions that surface in both text and nation. Lim imaginatively articulates those tensions, and her stories provide glimpses of the human costs associated with the process of nation building.

The short story form that Lim uses is a literary vehicle through which to bring those tensions into sharp focus. Through this genre she is able to encapsulate the personal dramas of ordinary people, dramas that are marginalized in the larger histories and romances of the region. Lim writes of,

people I knew best and understood best, that is, the Chinese people of my childhood and adult experiences. Sometimes an Indian, a Malay or a Eurasian would stray into my stories, but by and large, I kept to my little square inch of ivory.²⁷

This 'little square inch of ivory' reference, with its connotations of Chineseness and ivory carving, suggests the confined literary form and social history that Lim is chronicling in her stories, that is, vignettes of Chinese Singaporean life. Lim's subjects were all around her once she was able to pass

²⁶ *The Straits Times Weekly Edition*, op.cit., p.23.

²⁷ 'The Writer as a Cultural Anomaly', op.cit., p.37.

through her 'English educated elite' convent conditioning and 'daffodil fixation'.²⁸ Her discovery that standard British literary English was 'woefully inadequate' for her needs, and quite inadequate to satisfy the 'linguistic demands' of her subjects has led her to be creative in order to 'capture Chinese concepts'²⁹ in a Singaporean English that would reflect her society. This form of speech emerges as 'Singlish' in the stories 'Taxi Driver', 'Change of Heart', and 'The Awakening'. The challenge that she continues to face is the,

keeping of the language internationally intelligible, yet uniquely Singaporean in its deepest dyes and echoes.³⁰

This challenge is as much about distribution and marketing as it is about literature. The dilemma of speaking primarily to a local audience in a language it understands and being open to government control and confined to a small readership or, writing for an international audience and being seen as a cultural traitor or opportunist is a reality that all Commonwealth writers have to face. In the situation of Singapore there is the additional attraction of the education system's market-place. The maintenance of the English language for Singapore's commercial needs remains as necessary as it was in the colonial era, and teaching materials in English are an important part of that market-place.

The importance of the English language for Singapore was emphasized by recently re-elected Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, when he spoke of,

the need to keep English as a unifying language...we have made English the common working language...English must always be

²⁸ Op.cit., p.370.

²⁹ Op.cit., p.372.

³⁰ Lim, Catherine, 'The Writer Writing in English in Multiethnic Singapore: A Cultural Peril or Cultural Promise?', in Asian Voices in English, Mimi Chan & Roy Harris (eds), Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 1991, p.39.

the dominant administrative and economic language, to give all races equal chances in education and jobs.³¹

Seventy seven percent of the population of Singapore are Chinese Singaporeans, and the Prime Minister acknowledged their great use of Chinese dialects and Mandarin, but rejected the notion of using Chinese as the dominant language on the grounds that he wanted to see multiracial Singapore as a 'tribe', and a group with a sense of 'national identity'.³²

In Singapore's case its discourse of 'national identity' seeks to contain minority groups within a Chinese 'frame', and Lim's writing exemplifies this social positioning. Her stories are celebrated for the glimpses of Chinese familial life and history that they disclose, but beneath the surface text can be also glimpsed the political history of the area, and the many disparate groups who have been part of that history. When a Malay, or an Indian, does 'stray' into Lim's stories, ('Unseeing', 'A.P. Velloo', 'Muniandy' are examples of these 'other' presences in both text and nation), they disclose the dominating presence of the Chinese in Singapore historically and contemporaneously.

³¹ The Sydney Morning Herald, Monday January 6th, 1997, p.4.

³² Ibid.

PART I

Conflicting positions between modern western knowledge systems, traditional cultural practices, and the discursive practices of the nation's leaders, are represented and implicitly critiqued by Lim. Her stories detail hierarchical power structures, the effects of the changed role of women in Singapore, and the effects of cultural conditioning that has been part of the Chinese/Singaporean experience. In the stories 'The Song of Golden Frond',³³ and 'For the Gift of a Man's Understanding',³⁴ sexual harassment of women in both past and present Chinese society is interrogated. In the earlier setting power is situated in the traditional site of the home. The only escape from sexual abuse available to the bond-maid Golden Frond is through the act of self-immolation. In the modern setting the workplace outside of the home becomes an equally repressive site for women and reflects one area of labour restructuring that has not been protective of women. The female protagonist in 'For the Gift of a Man's Understanding' is restricted in her responses to sexual harassment by her employer because of her family's needs; she is under pressure from two forms of male power, domestic and business. Male authority remains effective in the modern setting.

Singaporean women are encouraged to take their place as independent actors in the economic development and nation building going on around them, but are at the same time urged to fulfil their traditional supportive role in a masculine hierarchical discourse.

Official figures of women's participation in Singapore's labour force show a rising rate of participation which has topped at 50% in 1990....Household work, however, is often unrecorded undervalued or not valued at all.....Better education for women is both a national

³³ Lim, Catherine, 'The Song of Golden Frond', in The Woman's Book of Superlatives, Times Books International, Singapore, 1993, p.74.

³⁴ Op.cit., p.33.

and personal asset, yet working mothers suffer from role conflicts and find it difficult to cope with the dual demands of home and career.³⁵

Lim engages with these contradictory demands that position women as both 'submissive' and 'active' participants in the construction of the nation of Singapore.

This dichotomy is one of the issues explored by Lim in the story 'Change of Heart'.³⁶ Here, Lim uses the form of the popular romance to critique the hypocrisy and cant behind the posturing of public figures, and the positioning of women in that process. In this story social perceptions and political expediency create areas of conflict that the characters must negotiate. Lim's characterization of the two women in the story is a representation of the changed role of women in present-day Singapore, but it is also a representation that highlights the continuing power of a patriarchal system which keeps women in traditional supportive roles.

The story depicts the dilemma of a rising executive who sees the wife of his youth, who had supported him financially through his professional studies, as an 'impediment' to his career prospects. He looks instead to a gracious, well-educated business colleague as the type of woman that he now needs to accompany him up the rest of the corporate ladder. It is a scenario that has appeared widely in different forms of literature. The story of an older wife being replaced by a younger woman reaches back to Greek drama with Medea, and forward into the 'soap operas' of the present, the film The First Wive's Club being a recent exploration of the theme. It reflects a masculinist discourse that

³⁵ Wong, Aline K., & Kum, Leong Wai (ed.), Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change, Times Academic Press, Singapore, 1994, pp.3-12.

³⁶ Lim, Catherine, 'Change of Heart', in The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1987.

permeates the cultures of East and West. The resolution of the story stays within the structure of the romance genre in that the husband returns to his family, chastened and wiser, and the 'other woman' is vanquished, but within that resolution Lim disrupts the discourses of gender and power upon which the genre rests.

In this story the husband's return is based on his own selfish motives, and he is 'wiser' only to the extent of his realization that he has to present a facade of 'respectability' if he wants to be a public figure, even if to achieve this end it means returning to a wife that he obviously despises. The wife retains her position but only at the expense of remaining a 'support player' in the system. And, in contrast to the usual fate of the 'other woman' in the romance genre, in this text she is the only character who emerges with any sort of credibility. There is no 'happy ending' in the story, only the appearance of a happy ending.

This popular fiction format allows Lim to reach a wide readership, many of whom could relate to the cultural and personal issues being explored in the story. In its Singaporean context, the world of the multi-national corporation within which the protagonist moves, reflects the 'westernization' of Singapore that is integral to the nation's growth, but which is also seen by Government leaders as a threat to 'Asian' values of home and family. The protagonist in this story discovers the difficulty of moving between the different cultures of his home life and the business world. In the relatively small world of Singapore, the physical proximity of different groups works against any ability to compartmentalize social spheres, and in this milieu the protagonist must appear to conform to social standards.

Lim introduces themes of cultural difference and class difference in the opening passages of the story through Geok's 'incessant chatter' about the

Managing Director's party being given in her husband's honour. Geok's inadequacy with the English language is one area of difference that creates conflict in the text. Her 'Singapore English' with its mix of Chinese exclamations, 'Yah lah', 'Ayah', points to the many levels of language skills at work in the nation. Her husband's efforts to have her privately tutored 'came to nought and she went on speaking English with the peculiar intonation and curious mixture of dialect that he found jarring' (p.12). To his ear Geok's staccato speech is 'strident' and 'vulgar', like that of an 'uneducated fish-seller' (pp.9-10). Implicit in the word 'uneducated' is the hierarchy of 'value' in which Singlish is inferior to Standard English.

Lim extends her critique of linguistic privilege with reference to Geok's daughter. To her husband's great irritation, Geok pronounces their daughter's name Geraldine, as Je-la-leen (p.19), and in doing so brings the up-market English name into a Chinese form and tone that dominates the English word. Geok's local idiom is one way that Lim uses her 'space' to subvert authoritarian positions about language. The narrative focalisation places the reader's sympathy with Geok, and thereby forces a reassessment of 'values' attached to Standard English. The opening passages of the story place the English language as peripheral to Geok's life; it is secondary to other areas of importance: social interaction and visits to the Temple medium.

The self-deprecation contained in Geok's chatter is lacking in sincerity, but it serves as a method through which to express her awareness of class difference in Singapore society,

Ayah! This party, that party! Always must go. Tonight very big dinner for my husband. At Raffles Ballroom. But I don't want to go. All these big, big people, all stylish. I only a simple woman, cannot speak the good high class English (p.2).

However, Geok does not allow this awareness to silence her. To her husband's distress she refuses to remain inconspicuous, and he recoils from her 'raucous laughter', and the 'courseness' of her speech and appearance (p.11). In contrast, Lim characterizes the 'other woman' as 'genteel' and a 'consummate hostess', attributes that are of marginal value to a woman's personal climb up the corporate ladder, but are of great value for the support they can offer to the aspirations of the dominant male business figure.

Despite their differences in language skills and social graces, both women are support players in the masculine discourse being interrogated in the text. Lim presents the protagonist as a man of 'great charm and strength of character' (p.15) who is caught up in an unsuitable marriage. But this public perception of him is tested in his reminiscences of a seriously ill school-friend whose 'tenacious attachment had filled him with revulsion'. His 'anger' toward the boy was 'held back' by his 'mature' and 'refined' urbane 'civility'. And as Lim proceeds toward the denouement, the reader is positioned to question the moral character of the protagonist. His ability to prevaricate and dissemble shows up the underlying 'vulgarity' of his own behaviour.

In this story Lim argues against the power of social criticism to actually change personal attitudes toward 'morality'. When the two clash, as they do in this story, duplicitous behaviour is more likely to result rather than a changed moral position. Through the oppositions that appear in the text Lim critiques the different value judgements that operate in the corporate and public sectors of the nation each of which serves the purpose of its particular ideology. Expediency determines the corporate world's view of 'morality', it refrains from moral judgements in the face of successful business dealings. 'After all, the Managing Director had divorced his first wife, whom he had married when he was very

young' (p.24). But as the protagonist finds out, the public sector demands at least the appearance of a stable family life.

When the protagonist is offered a promising political career path he learns that divorce is 'incongruous' for a Member of Parliament. In the discursive construction of Singaporean 'identity', in this story and in the nation, political leadership must represent the 'values' that are propounded in government ideology. They must be 'an example of moral conduct, especially among the young in Singapore' (p.28). This statement reflects public rhetoric in the real world about 'moral' behaviour such as that offered by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his Lunar New Year message,

We can build a developed and gracious Singapore founded on cohesive families, sound traditional values and good social behaviour.³⁷

Lim suggests in this story that such pronouncements do not reflect the reality of human relationships in Singapore. In this story, family 'cohesion' will be based upon deceitful behaviour. The husband is prepared to return to his wife for the sake of his political career, but does so in the hope that he will be able to retain his association with the 'other woman' in his life.

This pragmatic aspect of Chinese culture is underscored by Lim in the wife's behaviour. In a judicious 'switch of allegiance' she naively believes that her prayers to the Christian God Jesus had been answered. Her prayers had received no response from the local temple deities, 'they useless because never hear my prayers, and my marriage become worse and worse' but 'Christian God Jesus listen to my prayer, for my husband has come back' (p.32). She is quite

³⁷ The Straits Times Weekly Edition, Saturday February 24th, 1996, p.1.

unaware of the self-serving nature of her husband's decision or of her own self-serving pragmatic religious morality.

It is left to the 'other woman' to articulate the real reason for the protagonist's 'change of heart' toward his wife. He does not have 'the guts to face up to the truth' about his actions and his 'use' of the two women. Her rejection of his plans for a continuation of their relationship, and her support for the 'honest' and 'true' nature of his wife, is a critique of his, and by implication the government's political expediency in its emphasis on 'moral values' in the setting of goals and accomplishment of social programs. In 'Change of Heart' Lim takes issue with that expediency, and combines popular fiction and social commentary to expose the 'double standards' inherent in public rhetoric about 'values' and 'morality'.

The idea of a 'return' to an idyllic or 'original' past, is a motif in many post-colonial texts. Sally Morgan's My Place³⁸ is a personal account of one woman's search for the history of her people, K.S. Maniam's novel The Return³⁹ depicts the efforts of an emigré community to re-create their cultural origins in a new land, Ania Walwicz' fractured prose in Red Roses⁴⁰ is a kaleidoscope of incidents in the past history of her family in Europe, and fantasies about her 'origins', Margaret Atwood's narrator in Survival⁴¹ goes back to her childhood home in search of some kind of completion. In these texts the journey back may be actual or metaphorical, but in each case the idea of a link with an original past is structured around a sense of continuity and 'belonging'. For Lim's protagonist

³⁸ Morgan, Sally, My Place, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1987.

³⁹ Maniam, K.S., The Return, Heinemann Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 1981.

⁴⁰ Walwicz, A., Red Roses, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1991.

⁴¹ Atwood, Margaret, Survival, Virago Press, London, 1979.

in 'The Journey'⁴² the pull of memory and the emotional power behind the idea of 'home' creates the urge that he has to return to his village.

This notion of returning home, back to one's roots, is a powerful theme that contests, but is consistent with, the West's emphasis on linear progress toward a fully developed individual or society. Singapore's economic development since Independence follows this trajectory, but its construction as a British entrepot with immigrant labour confounds notions of 'origins' and 'authenticity' when these are attached to the idea of a 'nation'.

Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, arguing the case for the 'reality' of Singaporeans as 'hybrid beings', contest the

state's construct of the new Asian (which is) motivated by the quest for a sovereign national identity, (and) characterized by notions of cultural purity and authenticity.⁴³

They argue that such representation of Singaporeans does not reflect reality, its main aim being to 'legitimize and strengthen' Singapore's 'cultural and nationalist agenda'.⁴⁴ Lim picks up on these complex issues that surround notions of a return to an original past in her story 'The Journey'. The story of a wealthy Singaporean businessman who returns to the deprived village environment of his childhood, and the comforting ministrations of his elderly female relatives when he contracts a terminal illness, is developed as a social history that emphasizes the strength of cultural conditioning in the face of great social change in this case,

⁴² Lim, Catherine, 'The Journey', in Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore, Heinemann (Asia) Pty. Ltd., Singapore, 1986.

⁴³ Ang, Ien & Stratton, Jon, 'Straddling East and West: Singapore's Paradoxical Search for a National Identity', in Asian and Pacific Inscriptions, Suvendrini Perera (ed.), special book issue of Meridian, The La Trobe University English Review, Vol. 14, No.2, p.190.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the transition from a rural subsistence economy to an affluent city-based economy.

The two environments detailed in the story are in stark contrast to each other. The protagonist's childhood home reflects the earlier plantation economy of the Malay peninsula, and here Lim's writing is at its strongest and most evocative. From his adult perspective, the protagonist recalls his home as the 'very essence of filth and degradation' (p.43). It was unsanitary and 'infested with bugs'. But at this point in the story he is unable to appreciate what the reader is positioned to see. Lim depicts this poverty and the 'unimaginable superstitiousness' of the village women to exemplify a personal and communal caring interaction that is lacking in the antiseptic lifestyle of the modern setting.

In contrast to the poverty of village life, the protagonist's home in the wealthy port and business centre that Singapore has become, is replete with Italian marble, expensive comforts, and air conditioning. This home reflects the social demands placed upon modern Singaporeans to support a consumer-oriented individualist form of society. Modern medical practices are a part of that consumption pattern, and the protagonist 'felt grateful for the regular medical check-ups that he and his family were able to have' (p.45). However, he learns that his confidence in this form of preventive health care is misplaced, and 'fees charged' are no guarantee of good health.

Health care becomes a major theme in the story as the women approach the protagonist's condition from their different cultural perspectives. For the wife, the 'necessary journey' is to,

the best cancer specialist in the world based in New York....what can I do to make him agree to that journey? (p.47)

Lim presents the wife's faith in modern medical technology as being not so very different from the faith of the village women in the efficiency of their herbal remedies. Both approaches are shown in the text to be informed by the beliefs of their respective societies. Fever from foetid surroundings, and tetanus from rusty nails, are everyday dangers to poor and disadvantaged people living in unhealthy environments (pp.44-45), but Lim shows in the story that modern affluent lifestyles provide their own environmental health hazards. In this case carcinogens from tobacco are a source of danger, 'Why didn't you give up smoking when I told you to?' (p.46).

The protagonist's illness enables Lim to touch upon the changed social and economic roles played by the women in their particular communities.

his mother aunt and grandmother.....had pooled whatever money they had to send him to school and later to college (p.41).

It is subsequently revealed that this money had been earned through the most menial of tasks, the washing of clothes and cooking of food for sale. At this point unstated, but integral to the narrative, is the cultural imperative of patriarchy. The traditional village women, and the modern city woman will sacrifice themselves for the dominant male. Had the protagonist been female, the loving care given by the village women may still have been in evidence, but it is unlikely that the extent of that care would have included regard for scholastic achievement. In the patriarchal structure of the society, as a female, the protagonist would still be living in his village. It was his maleness, not any intrinsic worth or ability that had placed him in the modern setting.

The text fails to explain how the protagonist's wife achieved her business skills and escaped from the rustic 'ulu' culture that she violently rejects throughout the story. This elision may be due to the short-story format, but it is

clear in the text that she has no nostalgic affection for village life. Nonetheless, she also plays a supportive role in the masculinist culture. Her education and training enable her to support her husband in more lucrative ways than those available to the village women. Her support comes in the form of shrewd investment and share dealings (p.43). This progression from the petty capitalism of the village to the global capitalism of the city is another facet of the 'journey' motif that appears in both text and nation.

The materialistic values of modern Singaporeans appear to be critiqued in this story when the notion of being 'culturally deprived' is equated with the absence of toys (p.45). But Lim emphasizes in the protagonist's interior monologues that 'culture' resides in the lived experiences of people in their communities, and pleasure can be found in simple home-made or 'found' objects,

He never had a toy; he remembered that the only toy he had had was a plastic bear with a broken nose which his mother had asked from someone for him, and he had treasured this toy and kept it hidden from his sisters (p.45).

The 'culture' being exhibited in this remembrance is masculinist, the inference is that his sisters weren't so fortunate. However, the different 'values' being argued in the passage are required to co-exist with the social change taking place in the society. The different 'culture' of the dying man's children is part of that change. The only alternative is societal stagnation. This man's desire to return to his past life symbolizes a wish for 'security' that is at variance with a dynamic society.

Preference for the 'comfort' of his village home over that of his 'magnificent house' comes to the protagonist only when he is dying, and this is one of the 'little ironies' that emerge in this and other stories in the collection. But these little ironies disclose major social complexities which must be

negotiated when notions of an idealized past come into conflict with a modern lifestyle with different values and agendas. Lim seems to be saying that the world of tradition that the nation pays lip-service to, and values as a political agency, is being destroyed by the kind of lifestyle depicted in this story---and, that realisation of the loss entailed in that exchange will come only when it is too late.

PART II

Power and its contestation is the dominant theme in the story 'Or Else the Lightning God'.⁴⁵ Throughout the conflict upon which the story is based, Lim engages with the way in which power structures of Chinese family life are legitimized and reinforced through the application of Neo-Confucian principles within the family, particularly those pertaining to filial piety and care for the aged.

Neo-Confucianism was institutionalized as the dominant discourse from around the tenth century...(it) was 'pro-family' to put it mildly. The doctrine of Neo-Confucianism anchored the interests of the state in the affairs of the family. The distinctions of gender and generation that shaped the family were given legal sanction and backed by the threat of draconian punishments.⁴⁶

The accommodation of these Confucian precepts with the

need to manage, not resist, an increasingly successful industrial nation and which are delivered as an object of knowledge, a rational and authoritative epistemology,⁴⁷

creates a powerful and complex discourse through which Chinese Singaporeans must negotiate their social organisation at both personal and state level. The dangers of failing to accept the need for such accommodation of conflicting positions are graphically spelled out in this story.

⁴⁵ Lim, Catherine, 'Or Else the Lightning God', in Or Else the Lightning God, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., Singapore, 1948, p.178.

⁴⁶ Blake, C.F., 'Foot-binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labour', in Signs, Vol.19, No.3, 1994 (pp.694-695).

⁴⁷ Heng, G. & Devan, J., 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore', in Nationalisms and Sexualities, Parker, A., Russo, M., Sommer, D., Yaeger, P. (ed)., Routledge, London, 1992 (p.354).

'Or Else the Lightning God' is the story of an elderly mother-in-law whose irritating habits and 'weird' religious practices cause her daughter-in-law to order her out of her home. However, the strength of the old lady's curse upon her daughter-in-law because of that action has the effect of instilling the fear of God, in this case the Lightning God, into the young woman.

The story highlights the struggle taking place in Singaporean society between tradition and modernity where filial piety vies with individualism, and religious belief vies with secular materialism. Belief in the power of the old woman to do her, and her unborn child harm, causes the daughter-in-law not only to beg forgiveness for her uncaring attitude, but also to 'reverently' partake in one of the 'weird' religious practices to have the curse lifted. The reader is left to decide whether or not this story is a critique of social forces that restrict women's 'independence', or is instead a 'cautionary tale'---young people take care of your elders, or else!

Whichever way readers choose to interpret this story, Lim's representation of the conflict questions notions of the 'civilized society' that is embodied in the twenty-four parables of filial piety upon which Neo-Confucian family values are based. Neo-Confucian ethics reflect a society where,

Men lived in a world mediated not by the weapons of oppression, which remained ominously in the background, but by the civil functions and power of language. The distance a man bore from the practical acts of oppression and degradation of the other was his measure of civilization. Every child memorized Confucian inspired texts in the course of learning the language. Their place as a 'link' in the chain of being was taught to youngsters on a daily basis and in no uncertain terms. The 'self' that is embodied in this discourse of 'civilized behaviour' is also a social body that mirrors, reflects,

projects, and represents the language based categories that society takes to be the 'natural' order of things.⁴⁸

Lim not only critiques the power of those strictures in the past, she shows that ideas of being 'civilized' or 'well-behaved' are synonymous with subjection to the authority of the family and the hierarchal structure of male dominance in the present. In this and other stories, Lim shows the very real effects of Confucian ethics on the powerless members of society. But the irony in this story is that the 'weak' old lady is able to marshal a 'strength' that empowers her when her daughter-in-law is at her most vulnerable. The fluctuations in strength and weakness between the characters in the story reflects the power struggles that are taking place in contemporary Singapore over familial obligations.

Integral to this contestation are the effects of a modern capitalist ethos on traditional family relationships, particularly as they affect women. The greater participation of women in the industrial development of Singapore, and the power that comes from financial independence, is emphasized in this story. Here, much is made of the fact that young women do not have to 'fear' their in-laws because they are 'independent and educated' (p.182), but Lim points out that independence is a relative term, and the domestic sphere still remains the responsibility of women.

Women as a group, participate to a greater degree in the economy, while their responsibility for maintaining the family increases as well.⁴⁹

The economic and social 'value' of women is still largely concentrated around issues of their role in the family.

⁴⁸ Blake, op.cit., pp.689-696.

⁴⁹ Weiss, Anita M., in New Feminist Research, Vol.18, No.4, December 1989 (p.46), Review of Salaff, Janet W., State and Family in Singapore: Restructuring an Industrial Society, Cornell University Press, 1988.

The home and the family in 'Or Else the Lightning God' can be read as a microcosm of the conflicting cultures and subjectivities that make up the nation itself. Cultural difference is constantly mediated as characters re-form their positions in both spheres. In this story generational conflict exacerbates other areas of conflict and difference. Religious practices that are part of the ceremonial life of the elderly, which entail the burning of 'joss sticks and prayer papers' are 'horrible' to the young woman. She is unable to understand their actions. 'Why can't these old people leave their dead alone?' (p.180). In taking this position she is rejecting her own childhood acculturation, the power of which cannot be lightly dismissed and as she later finds out it will return to haunt her.

The young woman refers to her mother-in-law in ironic terms as the 'dowager'. It is part of a code to exclude the old lady from telephone conversations that are conducted in English. The description positions the old lady as obsolete and traditional, but it also has connotations of power and threat, and this is borne out in the final lines of the text when the mother-in-law is able to 'imperiously' dismiss her daughter-in-law from her presence, and literally force the young woman to 'eat' her words. The conflict between the two women is not only generational, it also reflects the conflict taking place between the de-ethnicized cosmopolitan Singaporean, and the Chinese-based traditional nation.

Exclusion is also practised by the old lady against her daughter-in-law when she 'chats over the fence' with the 'next-door washerwoman'. Their habit of 'lowering their voices and nudging each other.....was most annoying' (p.185). This introduction of class difference opens up further areas of power that impinge upon the supposed 'independence' of the young woman; her 'freedom' relies in part upon the labour and goodwill of other women. But this traditional 'household help' does not fit easily into organized labour relations in employment-rich Singapore. Servants are 'problems', they are able to create

difficulties for a working wife when 'the servant plays her out' (p.183). They create further problems and their presence also disrupts the household power structure by displacing the older women as carers. Here, servants will be employed to 'take care of the baby...and do the housework'. But this kind of dissension is inimical to notions of cohesiveness in the home, and by implication, the nation. Political rhetoric emphasizes that parents should,

make the extra effort to spend time building relationships within the family and instilling time-tested traditional values in their children. If they did not do so.....'they will live to regret it when they discover that maids, T.V. and goodies have not instilled the basic self-discipline and self-control all children must be taught to succeed in life'.⁵⁰

Unspoken in this statement is the fact that it will be women who will be expected to take this action and in doing so they continue to be constrained in the development of their own needs.

Lim symbolizes the power of this kind of cultural pressure and the constraints it places on women's minds and bodies in a dream sequence. The protagonist is in a temple where 'gods sat brooding', some were 'hidden' but she knew 'they were watching her'. In the dream, temple snakes become a metaphor for the social pressures that are being imposed on the young woman. She is at first unafraid of the snakes, because she knew that 'the poison had been taken out of them long ago'. But as they continue to move slowly toward her, and over her, she learns that they are able to exert a different, but no less effective, form of control over her movements. In a melodramatic turn in the dream, apparitions of her parent's-in-law advance upon her and the 'malevolence' of their appearance suggests that the young woman is not so confident about her beliefs and attitudes

⁵⁰ Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, speaking on social cohesion, the Straits Times Weekly Edition, February 24th, 1996, p.1.

as she purports to be. Fear for the life of her unborn child brings her to the discovery that she is not free to disregard the claims of her tradition and upbringing.

'Independence' has not freed women from domestic stress between relatives and servants, but this kind of disruption is minimised by male family members as 'trivial'. The husband in this story sees the conflict between the women in his 'characteristic casual way' (p.185) as resulting from inherently 'female' traits---women are 'endless trouble', they 'gossip' and talk 'nonsense'. His value judgement is incompatible with women's obvious competency in the business world of Singapore, and is part of a powerful gender-based discourse that works to the disadvantage of women.

The husband's 'terror' and tears only surface when there appears to be danger to the unborn child (p.192). His attitude reflects the cultural and political socialisation of women in tradition-oriented Chinese society as beings of less 'value', their prime purpose being that of bearers of children, particularly sons. It is a concept common to patriarchal cultures, and Lim shows in this context the daughter-in-law here is still vulnerable to this socialisation in spite of her financial success and western education.

The mother-in-law's dependence upon her son and daughter-in-law for financial support exemplifies a cultural practice that is under increasing threat in contemporary Singapore. Mother-in-law's upkeep is one of the sources of annoyance to the younger woman, 'we give that old fool two hundred dollars a month for pocket money, and she still complains it's not enough' (p.180). Criticism is directed at non-contributing sons who think 'they're hell of a filial' (p.181). That such familial obligations are being 'honoured more in the breach than in the observance' in contemporary Singapore is attested to by the Singapore

government's introduction of the Maintenance of Parent's Act of June 1996. In her newspaper column Tan Sai Siong praises this initiative because without this legal procedure,

elderly parents abandoned or neglected by their children...could appeal only to their offspring's sense of obligation.⁵¹

Argument that the law reflects a 'western context' is refuted by the journalist with reference to studies of both Asian and Western students that show a mix of attitudes toward filial obligations and she concludes,

perhaps the reality is that there is nothing Asian or Western when it comes to unfilial children, despite fables of the 24 acts of filial piety which some Chinese Singaporeans, like me had heard as bed-time stories when we were children...and if the proportion of elderly folks seeking help (under this legislation) remains overwhelmingly Chinese, then there should be cause for soul searching in the Chinese community.⁵²

Thus, filial piety remains an important concept when the Singaporean ideal of individualism and national independence is argued in the context of Confucian principles. The P.A.P. provides basic needs for citizens in public housing, education, and hospitals, but avoids the development of a total state welfare system by stressing the cultural obligations of the family to take care of its members, especially the aged. The different positions taken on this issue, and the resultant friction between family members, are emphasized in this story as Lim interrogates the dilemmas facing younger women when they try to fulfil the complex roles constructed for them by a modernising economy and conservative cultural programme.

⁵¹ Siong, Tan Sai, 'Prof Woon is right but there is no cause for celebration', The Straits Times Weekly Edition, June 15, 1996, (p.13).

⁵² Ibid.

The complexity of women's social roles is exemplified in this story in the young woman's statements and behaviour. Two themes emerge in her complaints about her mother-in-law. One relates to the cost of providing funds for the old lady and other relatives, 'here am I slaving like a fool in the office, helping to support a host of parasites' (p.181). This irritation is ameliorated somewhat by a sense of power in the knowledge that 'today they depend on us, they stretch out their hands for their monthly money' (p.182). However, in spite of her 'spirited defiance' she expresses uncertainty in the query 'so what is there to be afraid of?'. The fears that she refuses to accept----the 'calling up of the dead' that 'makes her flesh creep' and the 'delving into dark sinister things' are the fears that reside in her unconscious and which appeared in her dream. This is the area of power dominated by the mother-in-law but the efficacy of this form of threat requires that the opponents share the same belief structure and in spite of being educated and independent, this young woman has been inculcated with traditional familial obligations and religious beliefs which make her vulnerable to her mother-in-law's curse, the power of cultural influences dominates her life. Her belief that she is free from 'ties of obligation to the old' is shown by Lim to be illusory. The admonishment from her own mother about the way she is treating her mother-in-law is accompanied with a warning about the 'punishment reserved for those guilty of filial impiety' (p.184), and the young woman's familiarity with the Kitchen, Thunder, and Lightning Gods attests to the cultural conditioning that had been part of her formative years. The exchange also reflects a generational supportive stance on the part of old people to retain a position of power that is increasingly under threat in contemporary Singapore.

The conflict taking place in 'Or Else the Lightning God' is constructed around the cultural and political realities of modern Singaporean life. Some power can still be exerted on the basis of cultural practices and beliefs, but it may increasingly require the machinery of the state to enforce those customs. This

story was written sixteen years ago, but the issues raised in it are proving to be as pertinent to Singaporean society today as they were back then.

PART III

The previous stories analysed have shown how stories of life's 'little ironies', while they may be taken as neutral vignettes of a small slice of Singapore life, actually carry a load of social comment relating to the particular discursive positioning of family and nation by the island State. In The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream: Love Stories of Singapore, there appears to be an even more literary and non-committal collection of romances, especially when some of the stories resort to the fantastic as their expressive mode.

Rosemary Jackson argues that,

Literature of the fantastic has been claimed as 'transcending' reality, escaping the human condition and constructing superior alternate worlds.⁵³

But she goes on to qualify that statement by adding,

Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it.⁵⁴

The literary and social context that is relevant to Lim's story of 'illicit' love, 'Third Grandaunt's Story'⁵⁵ relates to the continuum of patriarchal discourse, the institution of the family within that discourse, and the state-controlled discourse of national identity. The two women in the story are caught up in their 'human condition' as participants in that construction, and within the textual frame set by Lim they use elements of the fantastic to transcend the 'realities' of their lives.

⁵³ Jackson, Rosemary, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, Methuen, London, 1981, pp.2-3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lim Catherine, 'Third Grandaunt's Story', in The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream: Love Stories of Singapore, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1987, p.114.

The narrator and her grandaunt Precious Tranquillity, in different zones of time and space, contest notions of the 'real' world and so subvert the authority of the moral codes that constitute the 'real' in their respective societies.

The narrator in this story is oppressed by the social demands of her bourgeois society. Her married lover will not leave his family to marry her, and she does not want to remain in a clandestine relationship. Her interest in the 'hidden' history of her long dead third grandaunt leads her to project her own dilemma onto the history of the grandaunt and use it to confront and work through her own repressed desires. In the juxtaposition of the two worlds depicted in the text, the societal censure faced by the two women differs only in kind. The reality of Precious Tranquillity's 'transgression' and illicit love affair is open to interpretation, but her determined 'intention' is in evidence in the text, and her desire to be with her lover emerges in her dream world.

At night...Precious Tranquillity slipped into the world that she shared with her lover; they traversed fields, vast spaces, they never left each other's side...She was trembling with happiness when the final union came...when she finally cried out sharply in the bursting joy, she felt her husband beside her...whispering, 'I'm sorry if I woke you' (pp.134-135).

Perhaps her actual rebellion was restricted to a simple breaking of 'house rules' (p.128), but in her deepest desires she constructed her own 'reality' and so resisted the power of patriarchy to repress and contain female sexuality.

The first-person narrative form that Lim uses sets up expectations of a factual account of events. But this 'reality' is disrupted by the introduction of a speaking subject who transcends time. The narrator is able to move from the present back into the past to speak with her grandaunt. By combining the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in this way, Lim attempts a re-evaluation of the possibilities

for subversive action on the part of women within the dominant patriarchal discourse. If women can 'think' about transgressing masculinist codes, then the next step is to 'act' on those thoughts.

Duality in the life and history of the grandaunt is exemplified in the placement of her in the text through the familiar controlled world of her family structure, and in its most common artifact, the family photograph. But through this prosaic artifact there emerges into the text active female energy and desire. In the photograph Precious Tranquillity's features suggest defiance and 'lively woman's feelings' waiting to 'burst through her bonds' (p.116). The photograph also serves to mark her as property in the family structure; it was the 'first necessary step to a long series of negotiations' leading to marriage. This was a transaction within which her mother drove a 'hard bargain' because Precious Tranquillity was of value for her 'social worth'. But Precious Tranquillity's energy and desire are inimical to the social order of the family. And it is the opposing forces of personal desire and social order that underscore the dialogue that the narrator is having with herself throughout the story.

In her critique of Emily Bronte's novel Wuthering Heights, Rosemary Jackson discusses the way that Bronte represents the family in that text as,

a frenetic construction of family ties, distancing the threat of the non-familial, the unfamiliar....The family excludes everything foreign to itself as being unnatural. It guarantees ontological stability through limitation and closure.⁵⁶

This same frenetic construction and exclusion occurs in the opening paragraphs of 'Third Grandaunt's Story'.

⁵⁶ Op.cit., p.129.

Second Grand Uncle---the older ones among the grand-children could remember him---lived and died enormously wealthy and happy---Grandaunt bore him three sons, all of whom grew up to be successful---One of Clear Jade's sisters became a nun in a Buddhist nunnery---remembered by her family with both affection and reverence.

But Third Grandaunt whose name 'Poh Cheng' meant 'Precious Tranquillity', although she knew little of that during her short life on earth---Third Grandaunt was seldom, if ever, spoken of. As if by tacit agreement, the family kept her out of that collective fund of ancestral reminiscences (pp.114-115).

Two techniques are at work here. One is Lim's own need to create texts that will,

---capture Chinese concepts. For instance, Second-Older-Uncle-on-Mother's-Side who was certainly of lower status than Third-Younger-Uncle-on-Father's-Side. I threw in 'kampong' and 'malu' and 'gila' and 'suay': never mind about explaining what each meant.⁵⁷

The other is a textual construction that delineates the sites of power and ontological 'certainty' that is disrupted by the independent actions of Precious Tranquillity in this story.

In the realist setting of the story, the narrator is also a threat to the construction of the family. Put into its Singaporean context, the ten years since the publishing of this story there has been no diminution of political emphasis on the importance of the family structure and support for its values.

A White Paper on Shared Values was tabled in Parliament in January, 1991...The values initially identified were 'placing society above the self, (and) upholding the family as the basic building block of society...'⁵⁸

⁵⁷ 'The Writer as a Cultural Anomaly', p.372.

⁵⁸ Chua, op.cit., p.32.

But the ubiquitous presence of that discourse in all areas of the media suggest that there is an unacknowledged resistance in the community to the 'values' that are being promoted in that discourse. In the face of that social pressure, a fantastic literary mode, contained within a realist frame, allows for a socially acceptable critique of the repressive function of the family structure. Using this textual device, Lim can present the other side of the story and the realities that are ignored in the rhetoric of political statements.

The hidden realities of the power of the family and the subordination of women within it, emerges here with the entry of the grandaunt into the text. Her threat to the stability of the family has led to total enclosure for her as an image 'tucked into a corner of a drawer' (p.124). Brought into the text by the imagination of the narrator, she advises women to 'never give up' even though they suffer from the results of 'holding on'. 'Meaning' is ambiguous in the passage. The direct meaning is for women to never give up on love, a seemingly passive romance sentiment, but embedded in the statement are suggestions of 'resources' and 'means' which indicate notions of active resistance on the part of women toward their oppression. Also notions of 'holding on' and 'suffering' have added interest in this story because of Lim's more aggressive stance in her later writing. In The Woman's Book of Superlatives⁵⁹ Lim rejects Charlotte Bronte's advice that women should accept and endure life's 'scorpions', this she describes as 'fatal advice' (p.7). Instead, the 'cruel gap between dream and reality' requires a 'hearty' hate, one that is continually fed, 'like an appetite insatiable of food or sex' (p.9) so as to be able to 'secretly fatten the scorpion and return it as a gift' (p.11).

⁵⁹ Op.cit.

Resourceful action was required by Precious Tranquillity to move beyond the borders of her domestic world in 'the dark cavernousness of that huge house' (p.128). This image of the house reflects the containment of women within a patriarchal discourse against which Precious Tranquillity struggles, and,

in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept her in the 'dark' - that dark which people have been trying to make (women) accept as their attribute.⁶⁰

Precious Tranquillity does move out from the dark and cross the border marked by the 'tasselled curtains' behind which she has been 'peeping' at her lover, 'but very carefully, so that not the slightest movement of the curtains revealed her presence behind' (p.125).

In this text the 'tasselled curtains' symbolize the 'veil' and its use in exotic representations of women in art. Discussing the role of the veil in masculine discourse Gilbert and Gubar see the veil as

An image of confinement different from yet related to the imagery of enclosure that constantly threatens to stifle the heroines of women's fiction, the veil resembles a wall, but even when it is opaque it is highly impermanent, while transparency transforms it into a possible entrance or exit.⁶¹

Here, the curtains act as a veil from behind which Precious Tranquillity moves for her lover to have 'a full view of her'. The erotic content in the passage is intentional 'she took him in completely and he her' (p.126). Nonetheless, even in this subversive act she still remains contained within the male gaze on both sides of the curtain.

⁶⁰ Cixous, Helene, 'The Laugh of the Medusas', in Literature in the Modern World, Walder, D., (ed), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, (p.316).

⁶¹ Gilbert, Sandra M., & Gubar, Susan, The Madwoman in the Attic, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984 (p.468).

Throughout the story notions of an autonomous subject acting within an ordered society and fully evolved social structure are being deconstructed. Both women are singly a mix of subjectivities and as a doppelganger representation they represent the divided self. Helene Cixous argues that,

The machine of repression has always had the same accomplices; homogenizing, reductive, unifying reason has always allied itself to the Master, to the single, stable, socializable subject.⁶²

The duality evident in this story rejects the compartmentalizing notion of a unified self. The passivity inherent in the name Precious Tranquillity is at odds with the 'frenzied', 'defiant' and 'passionate' side of her nature. And as 'other' she represents the part of the narrator's nature that is being repressed in the name of bourgeois morality. The photographic image 'beckons' to the narrator,

There she sat, looking out sadly upon the world with those big beautiful eyes of hers...her gaze seemed to fix itself on me...and I was impelled towards her, and I was with her (p.124).

Lim uses the photographic image of women in The Woman's Book of Superlatives to critique idealized representations of women---her subjects have their faces blacked out to suggest the 'reality' that is missing in such depictions of women.

It is significant that the two socially acceptable areas of consolation and understanding open to the narrator in the 'real' world of the text are those most concerned with the management of 'deviant' behaviour, the priest and the psychiatrist. And in both of these male dominated areas of social control the notion of a fully integrated personality is paramount.

⁶² Cixous, Helene, in Jackson op.cit., p.176.

The turmoil in my soul my psychiatrist was able to calm but not to banish; I could have sought spiritual solace from my priest, but I did not (p.123).

The narrator's socialization impels her toward 'normalcy', and 'control' which are silencing techniques and the priest's spiritual advice would have immobilized her completely, and in the dream passage at the end of the story she shows that her desire is to remain an active subject.

The fantastic makes one further irruption into the text in the form of a dream that mirrors the dream world of Precious Tranquillity. The grandaunt's dream world led her from joy to hope, but when the real world reasserted itself hope turned to despair and was followed by death. The narrator's world follows a similar trajectory. In her 'strange experience', an experience 'that did not seem to me like a dream' (137), she is reunited with her lover. But her hope was equally 'short-lived' and 'despair' is the final emotion in the text.

This lack of resolution in the story deconstructs notions of a stable and unified society. The tensions evidenced in the text show the ongoing contestation taking place as subjects push at the boundaries set by patriarchal capitalist discourse. Lim's characters resist their socialization within that discourse and in doing so pose a threat to the 'unity' and 'order' of their societies. Therefore, the realm of the fantastic is a subversive realm because it provides a space where other 'realities' and other 'selves' are able to surface.

PART IV

The historically determined condition (of Singapore) at the time of political independence was distilled and conceptualized by the P.A.P. into an issue of the 'survival of the nation...From then on this ideology of 'the survival of the nation' has served as the basic concept for the rationalisation of state policies that extend beyond economics to other spheres of social life.⁶³

This extension of the P.A.P. into 'other spheres of social life' is satirized by Lim in her collection of stories O'Singapore!.⁶⁴ The P.A.P.'s determination to project Singapore as a 'civilized Asian' society to the rest of the world, in contrast to the 'decadent' West, has led to a series of national campaigns to change community behaviour. Long-standing habitual practices such as spitting, swearing, littering, and western influences on fashion and choice of first names, have been condemned as not just personal offences, but offences against the nation, and the P.A.P. has introduced legislative procedures to enforce, or coerce adherence to the campaigns. The social effects of these often repressive edicts are shown in Lim's stories to surface in unexpected ways.

In 'The Malady and the Cure',⁶⁵ the 'malady' is the physical deterioration of a civil servant who must always be a staunch advocate for the national campaigns whatever their purpose. That is why,

He has four children...the age gap between his two elder sons and the two younger ones matches exactly the time gap between the campaign to 'Stop at two', and the campaign to 'Have three---or more, if you can afford' (p.13).

In this instance these campaigns relate to the population needs of the state at the time of independence, and the subsequent development of the nation. Because of

⁶³ Chua op.cit. p.4.

⁶⁴ Lim, Catherine, O'Singapore!, Times Books International, Singapore, 1989.

⁶⁵ Op.cit. p.9.

the high population growth in 1965, the 'Two is enough' campaign was introduced and,

consisted of granting a set of material incentives and disincentives in housing allocation, education opportunities for children, tax and health care benefits, accompanied by constant, aggressive publicity campaigns.⁶⁶

However, by 1984 the success of that campaign, accompanied by changes in traditional and social attitudes toward large families and a more pragmatic view of marriage and raising of children, which were then decided upon 'rational, even calculative, considerations',⁶⁷ led to demographic changes that were not envisaged by the government. Issues of class and race are embedded in population policies that contain disincentives for working class and minority groups to have large families, but which encourage well-educated Chinese families to have three or more children.

The protagonist in 'The Malady and the Cure' not only follows the population campaign directives, he responds to all the campaigns. In the 'Speak Mandarin, Avoid Dialects' campaign he changes his own, and his children's names to their Hanyu Pinyin forms, which his children say will 'make them feel ridiculous', and causes further confusion by changing their dog's name 'Bonzo' into the Hanyu Pinyin form Xiu. 'Bonzo' undergoes 'an identity crisis, and shows increasingly bizarre behaviour' (p.16). Lim emphasizes the ridiculous nature of some of the campaigns by adding that this character even changed the names of his caged canaries from 'Goldie, Chirpy, Louis, and Randy' to 'Jin, Xuan, Lie and Ran' respectively (p.16).

⁶⁶ Chua, op.cit., p.115.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

However, in the twentieth year of the total service of himself to the campaigns, the 'Malady' strikes Mr. Sai Koh Phan. Here, Lim is pointing out that constantly changing political directives have not only social effects, but physical effects as well. The stress placed upon this particular citizen is such that 'tension' is affecting every part of his body. It is significant that the only doctor who can help him is an 'eccentric' doctor whose advice is to break all the rules of the campaigns. The protagonist is appalled at this advice, the doctor must be mad, 'I'm a civil servant, he wails'.

The sting in the tail of the story emerges in the way that the problem is resolved. Prohibitions against spitting, swearing, lying and all the other admonitions of the government (p.20), are so entrenched in the civil service psyche it is impossible for the protagonist to commit such 'dastardly things on (Singaporean) soil' (p.19). Only when a piece of land is obtained in neighbouring Malaysia can these activities be freely indulged. By developing the story in this way Lim is touching upon the 'uneasy' relationship between Singapore and Malaysia. When Singapore achieved self-government in 1959, the P.A.P.,

fought hard for the merger of Singapore within an Independent Federation of Malaysia. Though this was achieved in 1963 Singapore's membership of the new federal state lasted only until 1965.⁶⁸

Ien Ang and Jon Stratton argue that the connotations in the break between the two are 'familial'. Chinese Singapore was 'forced out of the Malaysian family and forced to fend for itself'.⁶⁹ The reasons were economic as well as cultural and were traumatic for the P.A.P. Lee Kuan Yew's tearful announcement of the break on world television remains an enduring image. In 'The Malady and the Cure' Lim gives the ostracized members of the 'family' the chance to 'get back' at

⁶⁸ Asian & Pacific Inscriptions, p.182.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

their relatives. Singaporeans have done so well for themselves they are now able to literally 'spit on Malaysia'.

Other stories in the O'Singapore! collection critique other areas of government interference in 'social spheres'. Political correctness is taken to its extreme in the story 'Write Right Rite' when Lim places herself as a writer representing Singapore in a European Writer's Conference. Her set task is to present a 'positive' image of Singapore in short story form. However, when the text is 'fine-combed' by the Unit for the Revitalisation of Mother Tongues, the Department for the Enhancement of True Asian Culture, the Department of the Inculcation of True Moral Values, and the Ministry of the Environment for the removal of any unflattering images of Singapore, all that is left of the text is a complex series of oblique symbols which 'required a feat of imagination to pull them together into a story'. So intrigued were the judges by the entry, it received a 'special prize' for the creation of a 'new genre of the short story'. This fictional situation reflects a real experience faced by Lim when a dramatized version of her story 'A.P. Velloo' had the main character, an Indian, a racial choice that was integral to the plot, changed to a Chinese character for fear of causing offence to Indian/Singaporeans.⁷⁰

However, Lim keeps her strongest critique of 'social engineering' for the P.A.P.'s family planning programs. Her story, 'In Search of (A Play)', has as its central theme the government directive that exhorts single educated Singaporean women to marry and have children. It is a theme that emerges in other stories, 'Deadline For Love'⁷¹ and 'The English Language Teacher's Secret'.⁷² Here, it is treated humorously as a dialogue between a couple caught up in a government

⁷⁰ 'The Writer as a Cultural Anomaly', p.376.

⁷¹ Deadline For Love and Other Stories, p.1.

⁷² The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream, p.159.

sponsored match-making scheme, and the gurus of their opposing philosophies, Confucious and Shakespeare.

One of the reasons given for the reluctance of graduate women to marry Singaporean men is that 'Singaporean women have become too intelligent, articulate and socially sophisticated for Singaporean men' (p.60). The opposing positions of Confucian dialectics and Shakespearian romanticism in the responses of the sages to the questions of the young couple indicate the anachronistic nature of these discourses when they are applied as a categorical imperative to the mixed lifestyles and cultures of modern Singaporean life. The dialogue in the text exemplifies the arguments of Ang and Stratton that positions Singaporeans as 'straddling East and West'.

The difference between cultural expectations is highlighted in the suitor's presentation to the young woman of a 'large raw fish-head', which he considers a very acceptable gift. The young woman was hoping for long-stemmed roses. To her disappointment, her suitor's six months in an engineering firm in France had not produced the hoped for 'refined forms of courtship' (p.68). The gift of the fish-head reflects the patriarchal discourse behind the match-making scheme. At thirty-five this woman 'can still have some children if marry now' (p.72). And the gift of the fish-head reflects what else will be required of her.

Fish very good and expensive....very good for fish-head beehoon soup, like my mudder and grandmudder used to make (p.69).

The idea behind the 'Social Enhancement Unit's' experiment is to pressure women to return to the traditional role of primary carers in the family structure. But the woman in this story does not feel 'desperate' about her 'unwed' state (p.59), and is unwilling to fill the role of the 'ideal Confucian woman' (p.70). Her preference is for Mr. Vernon Alexander James Wu, an 'old flame' and

westernized Singaporean who only spends his vacations in Singapore. This preference exemplifies the realities of the P.A.P. leadership fears that western influences are undermining the traditional Chinese family structures and changing the demographics of the nation. The Chinese 'elite' are not producing sufficient children to replace themselves, while at the same time population numbers of minority groups are increasing. Issues of class and race are integral to development of the 'Great Marriage Debate'. The Family Planning and Population Board of 1966 included in its rhetoric,

Lower income groups who included many Muslims (were advised)...Allah has given us brains to think, it is only right that Muslims who cannot afford to have large families should not have large numbers of children.⁷³

Thus, the 'survival of the nation' should be read as survival of the 'Chinese' Singaporean nation. With reference to figures that showed decline in the birth rate of the Chinese, Lee Kuan Yew said, 'see what a problem we have created for ourselves...It's a horrendous deficit of 15,000 missing babies'.⁷⁴ Social disincentives were matched with the liberalisation of abortion and sterilisation in 1969. Lee Kuan Yew referred to this as the 'carrot and stick' approach.⁷⁵ Sterilisation as a social 'stick' is an issue that Lim picks up on in her story 'The Paper Women'⁷⁶ where the main character is a woman who has been voluntarily sterilised in order to get her son into one of the 'best' schools in Singapore, which is the 'carrot' in the equation. However, the woman finds herself regretting that act when she divorces, remarries, and wishes to have another child. The irony is, that this woman is one of those that Lee Kuan Yew would have preferred not to

⁷³ Ishak, Rahim, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, June 1968, in Rajakru, Dang, 'The State and Industrial Development: The Singapore Case', in Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol.26, No.1, 1996, pp.5-6.

⁷⁴ Rajakru, op.cit., p.9.

⁷⁵ Rajakru, op.cit., p.6.

⁷⁶ Lim, Catherine, 'The Paper Women', in The Woman's Book of Superlatives, Times Books International, Singapore, 1993, p.53.

avail herself of the procedure, this family is a wealthy Chinese family who should be following the 'Three or more, if you can afford' program. Dang Rajakru argues that the P.A.P.'s family planning and population control programs reflect western notions that position the family as a unit of social order but which also fit into the Confucian thesis. In this story Lim highlights the personal cost for women in these approaches to population numbers. In 'The Paper Women' she attacks a system where women's sexuality is 'reduced to pieces of paper signed by men' (p.60).

The positioning of population numbers and racial makeup of Singapore as a 'narrative of crisis' in the nation's development is interrogated by Heng and Devan when they argue that,

The large scale social project of biological reproduction---is the disturbing subtext of one of the most tenacious and formidable state narratives constructed in Singapore's recent history.⁷⁷

It is a narrative that is directed toward retention of,

such ratios of race and class as would faithfully mirror the population's original composition at the nation's founding moment.⁷⁸

The coming together of the values and traditions that are inherent in that narrative are satirized by Lim in the story 'The Concatenation'.⁷⁹

The narrator of the story is a male 'foetus in waiting' which is 'poised for flight from the cosmic void into the fecund womb of Mrs Esther Wong' (p.108). Both Mr and Mrs Wong want a child, but they want a 'male' child. 'Tradition has put into the bloodstreams of men and women the desire for male children'---'six

⁷⁷ Nationalisms & Sexualities, p.344.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ O'Singapore, p.108.

fine healthy daughters are as nothing compared to the one puny boy who comes after them' (p.109). This is a masculinist discourse that remains entrenched in Chinese traditional beliefs and one that continues to surface in modern Chinese families.

Mrs Wong 'recoils' from barbarous tales about the abandonment of female children in mainland China, and cherishes her own baby daughter. Lim slyly adds that no such 'barbarity' exists in modern Singapore. The barbarous practices of incentives and disincentives that operate in the government's population control programs do not disturb the humorous tenor of this narrative. The Wongs take joy in their daughter but find that 'tradition cannot be repudiated long' (p.109), and to the narrator's joy they decide to try to have a son. The text suggests that 'tradition' is being imposed on Mrs Wong by her mother-in-law, and she feels that she will not rest until she is able to face the old one and say, 'See, here's your grandson! Now are you satisfied?' (p.110). The passage exemplifies the public and private pressures placed upon women in Singapore society to be all things to all people.

However, 'Concatenation', the coming together of the correct chromosomes for the production of a male foetus at the time when his arrival will be politically and economically acceptable, does not occur and a second daughter is born to the Wongs. But 'tradition' remains a powerful force and the Wongs decide to try again for a son. The narrator is joyful that the Concatenation that will bring him into being has come at last. But the political link in this 'chain of being' now causes problems. If the Wongs do not 'Stop at Two' they stand to lose thousands of dollars in hospital fees, taxation deductions and maternity leave entitlements. 'The third child is a national arch-villain' (p.111). The expense could be justified if there was the certainty of a male child, but 'what if it's a girl again?' This cry from Mrs Wong brings into question her own confidence about

the 'worth' of a daughter. And when the extra education costs for the third child are taken into consideration by the Wongs the narrator assumes that his cause is lost because 'Tradition has been routed by Economics'.

However, the change in the 'narrative of crisis' from one of over-population to one of under-population gives hope once more to the narrator. In modern Singapore remaining unmarried has become an option for women, and this, coupled with the westernized trend toward smaller families, has caused a significant drop in population growth. If the trend continues 'the pool of human resources will diminish to a point when the wheels of industry could actually grind to a halt' (pp.113-114). This is a telling passage in the story presenting as it does, human beings as units of production. Heng and Devan argue that if Lee Kuan Yew's,

articulation of genetic inheritance, culture, education, intelligence, and reproductive sexuality seems inordinately mechanical, his faith in the assumed infallibility (and univocity) of statistics oddly uncritical, and his commitment to the logic of racial and class regulation relentless, it is because he subscribes without apology, to a projective model of society as an economic and social machine.⁸⁰

This attitude emerges in his speech when he refers to people as 'digits' and their inherited attributes as 'hardware' to be 'programmed' with 'soft-ware' (ideology education culture, etc.).⁸¹

This form of societal 'engineering' is a state-dominated power play to control women's sexuality and reinforce the role of the family. There is no suggestion on the part of the government that unmarried Singaporean women should be encouraged to have children, even if they are well-educated Chinese

⁸⁰ *Nationalisms & Sexualities*, p.346.

⁸¹ *Op.cit.*, p.358.

women who are well able to afford them. The increased number of 'suitable' babies, that is, those of the privileged classes of Chinese Singaporeans, must be part of the traditional patriarchal family structure. The continuing emphasis that is put on the importance of the family as a building block for the nation bears out the argument forwarded by Benedict Anderson⁸² that nations and nationalities are grounded in kinship and religious structures and values. Chinese Singaporeans are able to 'imagine' themselves as a nation through the trope of the family. Minority groups are included as members, but they appear largely as 'poor relations'. Rhetoric espousing the nation in familial terms, where the strength of the family equates with the strength of the nation, points to the basis upon which the social and national programs of the P.A.P. rest.

Thus, emerging from this lighthearted treatment of the population control programs of the P.A.P. are the discriminatory practices of the government which are designed to control the reproductive lives of women for the benefit of the nationalist agenda. The perceived dangers posed by uncontrolled female sexuality are such that political and cultural pressure must be brought to bear on Singaporean women in order to protect the power of the Chinese patriarchal family structure, and the Chinese dominated state structure. Lim's use of humour deflects attention away from the 'disturbing subtext of race and class that is integral to the population control programs'. In 'The Concatenation' the pragmatic decision of the Wongs not to have a third child appears to be a matter of personal financial choice, but in reality their choices have been politically manipulated to conform to the nationalist and cultural imperatives of the P.A.P.

⁸² Anderson, Benedict, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Verso, London, 1983.

PART V

The P.A.P.'s intervention in the everyday lives of Singaporeans in the post Independence years is nowhere more clearly marked than in its housing policies. In an effort to house the population the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was created in 1960, and the policies set in place then have continuing effects in the present. Growing affluence in the nation has meant that a private housing sector has emerged for wealthy Singaporeans, but the HDB is still a major provider of public and low-cost housing for the majority of Singaporeans.

Detailing the setting-up and progress of the HDB Chua Beng-Huat argues that,

The high degree of political and ideological legitimacy derived from near-universal housing provision has ideological pay-offs in other areas of social life. The monopoly of housing is also used to shore up the family institution. Public housing is only available to households. Only single persons who are presumed never going to marry---males of more than fifty years old and single females of over forty years old---are eligible to rent; and then only if they share with another person. Young single individuals are as a rule excluded in line with the government's pro-family policy.⁸³

The HDB's codes make it a powerful agent of social engineering and this policy directive adversely impacts upon those members of the society who do not fit the guidelines set down to achieve that goal. However, as G. Shantakumar details in her research on Singaporean Aged Women,⁸⁴ it is difficult for the authorities to know for sure just who is the occupier or owner of a dwelling, what shared living arrangements exist, and by implication, how accurate were the details supplied to the Board at the time of the original rental or purchase. This leaves open a 'grey

⁸³ Chua, op.cit., pp.140-141.

⁸⁴ Shantakumar, G., 'Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Older Women: Issues and Policy Implications', in *Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change*, Wong, Aline K., & Kum, Leong Wai, (ed), Times Academic Press, Singapore, 1993, pp.222-223.

area' that can be manipulated by those discriminated against in the Board's directives. In the story 'Deadline for Love'⁸⁵ Lim engages with the exclusionary edicts of the HDB as they affect those Singaporeans who fail to meet particular definitions, and the subterfuge that becomes necessary in negotiations with the HDB.

For those Singaporeans who are outside the norms of the patriarchal structure of the nation, such as single independent women and homosexual men, and who are without the wealth to enter the private housing market, this political discrimination is an added burden to those that they face in other areas of social discrimination. Through deception it is possible for these Singaporeans to circumvent the requirements of the HDB and Lim depicts one such method in 'Deadline for Love'. The deception that takes place in the story is the result of a patriarchal discourse that valorizes ideals of 'family' and 'femininity' within a framework that excludes female 'difference' and sexual 'difference'. But the story also shows that people are not so easily contained within that framework, and resistance can take many forms.

In this story the needs of the protagonist, a single woman trying to create a life for herself free from parental restrictions, come into conflict with the ideologically motivated 'unfair' policies of the HDB which were 'clearly part of the government's strategy of enticing single men and women to get married, but it meant that women like herself were condemned to stay with their mother forever' (p.10). The fortuitous appearance of a 'suitor' and a proposal of marriage seems to fulfil all the protagonist's dreams, but as the story unfolds it becomes clear that this man has needs of his own that he is trying to resolve. The subsequent

⁸⁵ Deadline for Love and Other Stories, op.cit.

working out of the plot puts into perspective the human dilemmas that are not taken into consideration in the state's development of the housing sector.

The story is thus based upon a real social difficulty faced by Singaporeans. Thirty-seven year old Agnes wants to move away from the terrace house that she shares with her mother, and its,

clutter of cheap furniture, the ubiquitous ancestral altars, her mother's over-solicitous, querulous voice raised to ask the most tedious questions, the noisy relatives and neighbours---these were not the right ambience (p.9).

Her dream is for a HDB 'gleaming new flat of wondrous space'. The 'clutter' of the former, juxtaposed with the 'space' of the latter, reflects the change in Singaporean society from the communal familial lifestyle of traditional Chinese culture to that of westernized ideas and the growth of the nuclear family. The 'ambience' that Agnes seeks in the new surroundings is one that will be conducive to her becoming sexually active, a state that she equates with being 'critically oriented'. In spite of her successful career, her lack of sexual experience meant that she was 'unoriented and unfocussed'. The possession of a HDB flat is part of a 'deadline' that she has set for herself in her decision to reach 'the apogee of love's arc' (p.8).

Through Agnes's romantic notions of sexuality Lim is able to interrogate the effects of a masculine discourse that positions women as objects of male desire only if they measure up to constructed ideas of 'beauty'. It was clear to Agnes why she was 'always standing outside the pale of romance and looking wistfully in' (p.6). 'Large, stocky, awkward' as a child, and overweight with 'a chin that rippled out of control' as an adult, situates her outside of socially accepted notions of feminine beauty. She is thus undesirable to men. This is a

self-definition that is shaped by masculinist definitions of female attraction, the power of which is attested to by the multi-national growth of the 'beauty industry'.

Agnes's colleague Fiona with her 'astonishing beauty and sexuality' epitomizes the liberated modern Singaporean woman that Agnes aspires to become. Agnes's accomplishments as one of Singapore's top journalists 'clearly marked for further ascent' (p.1), are of little comfort to her 'against the bleak prospect of a virginity determined to stay' (p.8). Her 'revenge' on Fiona, a 'puffball', taken in the form of 'academic and professional achievement' had not 'secured her the fulfilment she wanted' (p.8). In spite of Agnes's excellence 'No man had ever propositioned, much less taken her to bed' (p.5).

The romantic representation of female sexuality and sexual relationships gained by Agnes from 'TV, videotapes, magazines and erotic novels' (p.8), is part of the patriarchal discourse that positions Agnes as being outside of the norm set for female desirability. The 'romantic' nature of those representations disguises the power relations upon which the discourse is based---male as active, female as passive. In this power structure the only relief offered to Agnes is one suggested by Fiona,

a private trip to Bangkok where there were men who for a fee discriminated not against even the most unappealing of female forms, or a private trip to one of the side shops in Singapore itself where secret ingenious gadgets for the assuagement of female loneliness could be bought for a few dollars (p.7).

This suggestion is repugnant to Agnes because she is fixed on her romantic ideals, and she fails to see her double displacement in the masculinist discourse of patriarchy in that she is 'unattractive', and worse still, 'independent'.

Agnes's personal response to the HDB's regulations that denied her a flat on the basis of her single status, came in the form of a 'scathing article' about the discrimination entailed in the policy, but this was 'toned down' by her editor until it was 'no more than a limp bland piece of descriptive writing' (p.10). This story predates Lim's own 'scathing article' which criticized the government's 'distancing' of itself from the day to day problems of its citizens. The treatment of Agnes's article by the editor reflects Lim's awareness of the line that needed to be drawn in any public criticism of government policies at the time of this story's publication in 1992, and suggests that Lim was a touch sanguine in her view only two years later that there had been any great change in the P.A.P.'s attitude toward public criticism, and that she would be able to use her newspaper column as a forum for social criticism. Questioned on the statement in her 'Great Affective Divide' article that outspoken Singaporeans feared being 'marked out and victimized' Lim replied,

I have never personally met an outspoken person who has been marked out and victimized. Neither have my friends. So it would appear that there are very few such persons. On the other hand, the impression persists that there are few, precisely because the risks are too great.⁸⁶

The risks faced by those who criticize P.A.P. leaders is very great. In the most recent defamation case,

Mr Lee and ten other government leaders including the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, have claimed a record \$12 million payout, with \$3 million for Mr Lee himself.⁸⁷

The payout reflects a situation in which Lee Kuan Yew,

⁸⁶ Lim, Catherine, 'Catherine Lim: Why I wrote the Great Affective Divide article', 'The Insight Interview', Tan, Sumiko, Straits Times, September 24th, 1994, p.33.

⁸⁷ Baker, Mark, 'Lee poised for legal knockout', The Sydney Morning Herald, Saturday, May 10, 1997, p.23, World.

has already achieved what is believed to be an international record in the field of salving wounded reputations with bucket-loads of cash.⁸⁸

In the past 17 years Mr Lee,

has contested eight major defamation cases and been awarded a total of more than \$2 million in damages...he has never lost an action in court, is now the most successful individual defamation litigant in history.⁸⁹

Those sued by Lee Kuan Yew include,

1979 J.B. Jeyaretnam who accused Lee of nepotism, Lee received damages of \$120,000.

1989 Seow Khee Leng alleged corruption against Lee, Lee received damages of \$230,000.

1990 Derek Gwyn Davies (editor and publisher of Far Eastern Economic Review) alleged corrupt use of power against Lee, Lee received damages of \$210,000.

1990 J.B. Jeyaretnam alleged Lee abetted suicide of a government minister so victim could avoid corruption investigation, Lee received \$240,000.

1992 Quek Teow Chuan alleged corruption against Lee in government projects, Lee received damages of \$365,000.

1995 International Herald Tribune newspaper alleged nepotism, Lee received damages of \$275,000.

1996 International Herald Tribune alleged that Lee suppressed legitimate democratic activity by suing opponents for defamation in claims lacking merit, Lee received \$365,000.

1997 Yazhou Zhoukan (Hong Kong-based Chinese magazine) stated that Lee's commercial purchases should be investigated, Lee received damages \$410,000.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

This interaction between fictional and real journalism highlights the extent of social commentary that is woven through Lim's narratives, and which reflect the narrative of Singapore itself under the paternalistic guidance of the P.A.P.

In 'Deadline for Love' however, the only response to Agnes's article criticizing the HDB's policies is that from a man who is subsequently revealed to be the man whom Fiona had tried unsuccessfully to attract, and this character introduces other areas of social control into the story. 'Duane', whose name 'breathed promise' to Agnes (p.11), is not a fully developed character in the story; his characterization as a homosexual male in a homophobic society serves to disclose other areas of discrimination in HDB regulations. Lim's 1970's story dealing with homosexual and transvestite culture 'Father and Son' gives a glimpse of the Gay culture that is part of Singaporean society and tolerated for its value as a tourist attraction, but otherwise considered as 'perversion', and ignored as a social group that has a 'right' to be included in government programs such as those offered by the HDB.

Therefore, it is not easy for the reader to condemn out of hand the actions of Duane and his deception of Agnes. He is portrayed with some sympathy in the text; 'The man was genuine enough: Agnes possessed no great wealth nor was likely to inherit any' (p.12). 'Their joint money was enough, after the major expense, for some simple furnishings and a simple wedding' (p.13). Agnes's self-delusion is sustained throughout the text, and the final denouncement is shattering for her, but for the reader who has been given all the clues, it is no surprise, and the emotions that are generated by the story are those of sympathy for both characters. 'Deadline for Love' is more than a story of a lonely vulnerable woman being taken advantage of by an unscrupulous man. The story draws attention to the positioning of men of 'difference' in patriarchal discourse,

and points out that both Agnes and Duane are oppressed by the norms of patriarchy.

The story is a critique of power constructs that seek to contain and control 'difference' in word or deed. Highlighted are the social constructs which place a woman's identity and 'desirability' within masculinist ideas of beauty, and which allow no place for sexual 'difference' from that set in a masculine discourse. Condemnation in the text comes from the sub-text, that is, the machinations of the government to use its political power to silence opposition, and direct its citizens' lives along a trajectory of its own making. The irony that emerges at the end of 'Deadline for Love', is that the P.A.P.'s 'best laid plans' for the pro-family structure of the HDB are defeated. No 'family' is likely to emerge from the virgin, or homosexual, in this flat.

CONCLUSION

Lim's texts reflect the social effects of the authoritarian structures of patriarchy, capitalism and nationalism on the lives of Singaporeans. But they also reflect the local and individual areas of power that exist within, and work in opposition to, those structures. The stories of traditional patriarchal Chinese family life present the ways that women used the limited areas of action available to them even when such empowerment meant their own destruction. 'Third Grandaunt's Story' exemplifies women's determination to express control over their own lives, and this desire to escape from, or circumvent, prescribed social positioning widens in the stories of modern Singapore to include resistances to the paternalistic and authoritarian structures of state power.

The stories reflect the interdependencies, interrelations and differences of class, race and gender which make up the social network of Singapore and show that this network cannot be easily contained within the rigid mind-set of the 'Confucian thesis' which privileges the dominant conservative Chinese sector of the nation. As a member of the Chinese elite Lim's writing moves her beyond her social/cultural positioning in this discourse. Through her writing and her position in the education system she is in a unique position to represent the different, or silenced, voices that exist within the framework of her own 'little square inch of ivory', and from this, move further to critique wider areas of social difference and disadvantage in Singaporean society.

The overall effect of Lim's writing is one of movement. At both personal and national level her work reflects a dynamic society that has undergone, and is still undergoing, great social change. The role of popular fiction in this environment is potentially a mediating force because of its critical social commentary and wide availability. Lim's representation of both traditional and

modern Singaporean life gives a 'realist' view of her society which can be accepted because of its 'fictional' positioning.

The texts examined here exemplify the amount of resistance that is possible within seemingly hegemonic totalizing systems. The P.A.P.'s loosening of political pressures on Singaporeans appeared because of a complex mix of national well-being and public pressure for less control by government agencies over the life choices of Singaporeans. Lim pushed too hard at the government's tolerance for change in her journalism, but she nonetheless caused ripples of interest in the nation and in the region. The social commentary of her fiction will perhaps remain a longer lasting and more effective agency for change at both familial and government level in Singapore.

For the present however, public criticism has had the effect of 'silencing' Lim, she has moved away from political comment in recent times, and her latest work, a novel The Bondmaid, is a return to themes of memory and family. Peter Wicks suggests that her 'talents and her taste for celebrity will take her towards writing for stage and screen in the United States as well as Singapore' but 'there is unlikely ever to be another Little Ironies, at least in literary form'.⁹¹

⁹¹ Wicks, Peter C., 'Catherine Lim's Latest Work', a paper prepared for the Ninth Colloquium of the Malaysia Society, held at the University of New England, Armidale, 21-22 October, 1995, p.10.

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